Snappy Snaggers

Apps To Grab Your Screen Shots & More

If your job entails producing software documentation or writing articles for computer magazines (welcome to the club), chances are you need to capture screen shots. So, chances are you'll want a good screen shot utility.

The ability to capture screen images is built into Windows. Just press the PRINT SCREEN button on your keyboard and the image will copy to the Clipboard. You can then paste it into an image editor (or Paint) and crop and save it. This method isn't efficient, and it doesn't work with many games or programs that do their own keyboard handling. In short, a screen shot utility can mean better screen shots faster. I compared three screen capture utilities to see how they stack up.

Hyperionics HyperSnap-DX

HyperSnap-DX will capture your screen—and just possibly your heart. It offers virtually every feature you could want, plus the kitchen sink, plus your neighbors' sinks, too.

The program's interface resembles a graphics-editing program, and indeed the app does include a complete set of graphics manipulation tools for touching up your screen shots, including filters and automatic trimming. The color adjustment tools include useful tricks, such as the ability to substitute one color for another or invert black and white while leaving other colors untouched.

You can set the resolution of the screen shots you make, and you can even set different horizontal and vertical resolutions. This is useful if you'll be outputting to a printer with, say, 300 x 600 dpi resolution. In addition to the GUI, HyperSnap works from the command line, and you can use it for batch or scripted screen captures.

The program can save images in 25 image formats, the most of any program in this roundup. Besides GIF, JPEG, and other staples, HyperSnap saves images as Windows icons and in EPS, FAX, and Macintosh PICT formats. The program can also send screen shots as email attachments or make them your wallpaper.

Like SnagIt, HyperSnap can capture oversized windows by scrolling. In WinXP, the program also offers Extended Active Window screen shots; before capturing a window, HyperSnap asks how big you want to make the window. You can specify any size, even much larger than the physical screen.

To get you started, the program includes several tutorials, including a quick guide for beginners and advanced tutorials with tips for capturing images from DirectX games and DVDs.

Then there are features that are beyond the call of duty. In addition to the computer's screen, the program can capture images from digital cameras, scanners, and other TWAIN devices. If taking all these screen shots leaves your fingers feeling tired, you can control the program using voice commands. Say "capture the active window" and HyperSnap will. This requires WinXP, or for earlier OSes, installation of Voice Command Interface.

In addition to the English version I tested, HyperSnap is available in Italian, Japanese, Russian, and Spanish versions.

Longfine Software Easy Screen Capture

Easy Screen Capture is the most barebones utility we tested. That's not to imply it's underpowered (it beats the pants off of PRINT SCREEN), but it's also not bulging with features of questionable usefulness. However, Easy Screen Capture is easy on the wallet. At $19.95, it's the least expensive screen shot grabber here.

Easy Screen Capture can grab an entire screen, single active window, arbitrary rectangular region, or single object, such as a menu, toolbar, or button. It saves images in just BMP, JPG, GIF, and PNG formats, but these are the ones most users are likely to need anyway.

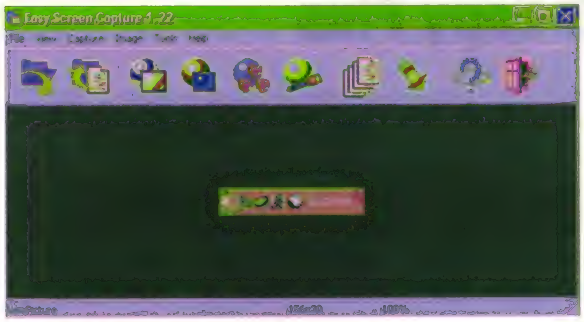
The program's image history function lets you review and recover previous screen shots, even if you didn't save them the first time around. Easy Screen Capture also includes a few basic filters, such as contrast and color balance. A scale function will let you resize an image, keeping the proper proportions, although there is no undo command for these image-manipulation functions once you've done so.

Easy Screen Capture was the only utility I tested that had trouble capturing images

In addition to its graphical interface, HyperSnap-DX offers a command line mode for making automated or scripted screen shots.

HyperSnap-DX
$35
Hyperionics
www.hypersnap.com

CPU Ranking: 0 = Absolutely Worthless 2.5 = Absolutely Average 5 = Absolutely Perfect



Easy Screen Capture has an easy-to-use interface, plus its price is easy on the wallet. However, the program doesn't capture images from games gracefully.

Easy Screen Capture
$19.95
Longfine Software
www.longfine.com

from games. The app's documentation says it can take images from some DirectX games, but I had trouble doing so with the ones I tried. In addition, fast-moving images tended to end up being cropped, and attempting to capture a portion of one game screen caused graphical glitches that can't be described with words. In another game, Easy Screen Capture didn't notice we had pressed the hotkey at all, so no screen shot.

Because Easy Screen Capture is distributed as a ZIP file, installation isn't as smooth as with the other utilities. The program isn't overloaded with features, but it's easy to use and worth considering if you need straightforward screen shots on a budget.

TechSmith SnagIt

Calling SnagIt a full-featured screen shot utility is an understatement. In addition to the common options of capturing a whole screen, a single window, or a rectangular region, SnagIt lets you capture arbitrary regions, such as a triangle, ellipse, or hand-drawn area.

You can save an image in seven common (and not-so-common) file formats. In addition, SnagIt can attach the image to an email message. You can even select multiple destinations for each screen shot. For example, you could save it as a GIF, email it, and print it all at once. An optional preview window immediately shows you the results of the capture, letting you use or discard the image.

SnagIt includes filters that automatically perform color conversion (going to monochrome, halftone, or grayscale), color effects (such as contrast and gamma) borders, and watermarks.

For an image you want to capture that doesn't fit on a single screen, such as a long Web page, SnagIt's Autoscroll feature fetches the entire contents of a scrolling window and keeps the image in one file.

SnagIt's unique Text Capture feature captures information as editable text instead of graphics. You can use this to extract text from places where copying to the Clipboard doesn't work, such as when you need to copy a list of files from Windows Explorer. Text capture doesn't work in every application—it doesn't use OCR to extract text from a graphics object—but it can be a timesaver.

A Video Capture function lets you create movies of screen activity. This can work for creating quick how-to animations, but the video capture function does not offer editing tools, and you can only save movies as AVI files. In addition, you may have to tweak system settings to get high-quality movies. At millions of colors, SnagIt was able to capture just 2fps, making for a jittery movie.

The package also includes SnagIt Studio, a companion application for adding captions and callouts to your screen images. With it, you can easily add arrows that point to an important feature of a screen shot.

The first time you run SnagIt, a wizard guides you through the concepts of screen capturing. This is a simple feature but one that makes the program more accessible to new users.

The Big Picture

Each utility tested here will do the job under most circumstances. Easy Screen Capture and SnagIt have the most intuitive interfaces, but Easy Screen Capture isn't a good candidate for grabbing images from games. HyperSnap and SnagIt are both brimming with features that will ease the workload for technical writers. All three programs are shareware, so download them from their Web sites and try them before committing to one. ▲

by Kevin Savetz

SnagIt has every feature you could want and more, including the ability to capture oversized windows and irregularly shaped regions.

SnagIt
$39.95
TechSmith
www.snagit.com

CPU Ranking: 0 = Absolutely Worthless 2.5 = Absolutely Average 5 = Absolutely Perfect